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A Comparison of Special Admit and General Admit College Football Athletes' Academic
Progress and Perceptions of Academic Support Services

Nicole Realle McCullough

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Educational Specialist

Gordon Gibb, Chair
Todd Pennington
Melissa Heath

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

A Comparison of Special Admit and General Admit College Football Athletes' Academic Progress and Perceptions of Academic Support Services

Nicole Realle McCullough
Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education, BYU
Educational Specialist

This study investigated the academic progress of special admit football players compared to general admit football players at a private, Division I university in the western United States. Using mixed methods, the researcher quantitatively compared the two groups in terms of credits enrolled, credits attained, GPA and progress toward degree. The researcher also interviewed special admit football players to determine their perceptions of academic support service. Data answer the quantitative and qualitative study questions. Most notably, the researcher found that, while general admit football players had higher GPAs than the special admit athletes, the special admit athletes experienced the same amount of progress toward degree as their regular admit teammates. Furthermore, participant interviews revealed that athletes most value the learning specialists and tutors within the university's support service framework. Discussion includes implications for practice.

Keywords: special admit athletes, college football, academic support, tutoring

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Each member of my thesis committee brought an array of knowledge and skills. The professional wisdom and experience of both Dr. Melissa Health and Dr. Todd Pennington was invaluable during the research process. I am especially indebted to Dr. Gordon Gibb, my committee chairman. Dr. Gibb's sense of humor made this research project a truly enjoyable experience. He inspires me to be better each day.

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DESCRIPTION OF THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis, *A Comparison of Special Admit and General Admit College Football Athletes' Academic Progress and Perceptions of Academic Support Services*, is written in a hybrid format. The hybrid format brings together traditional thesis requirements with journal publication formats.

The preliminary pages of the thesis reflect requirements for submission to the university. The thesis report is presented as a journal article and conforms to length and style requirements for submitting research reports to education journals.

The extended literature review is included in Appendix A. Appendix B contains the study's interview guide, followed by Appendix C, which contains the consent form.

This thesis format contains two reference lists. The first reference list contains references included in the journal-ready article. The second list includes all citations used in the Appendix entitled "Extended Literature Review."

Introduction

Calls for accountability for higher education outcomes have generated an increase in the breadth and depth of academic support programs (Brown, 2012; McKeown-Moak, 2013; Zumeta, 2011). Whereas advisors historically assisted students to declare majors and enroll in appropriate courses, contemporary support includes remedial courses, tutoring and mentoring services, study skills workshops, and more “homey” campus study areas as strategies to retain and graduate more students (White, 2015). Academic support begins with advisement, a universal feature of postsecondary education tasked with helping students make informed educational decisions. Academic advisement is the on-campus service with the potential to reach every student with information about an institution’s mission, purpose, academic offerings, co-curricular activities, and career planning (White, 2015). Its essential function is to guide and assist students to choose appropriate majors and then provide support as students complete requirements for graduation (Pizzolato, 2008).

Advisement generally takes one of three forms: centralized at the university, housed in academic units, or assigned to faculty members (Pardee, 2004). Kot (2014) found that students who accessed centralized advising had higher GPAs and less attrition after the freshman year than students who did not use advisement services. Addus, Chen, and Khan (2007) found a strong preference for unit-level advisement. Academic unit-level advisement occurs when individual schools or colleges within a university provide localized advisement centers. Academic unit-level advisement potentially provides more personal attention than a campus-wide system, especially at larger universities. Student survey respondents in the Addus et al. study reported that centralized advisement was ineffective and that unit-level advisement was preferable. Other researchers found that students valued supportive relationships with

professional advisors who show interest in their wellbeing more than they valued other variables (Mottarella, Ritzsche, & Cerabino, 2004), a situation potentially more feasible with unit-level advisement. Advisement that provides more opportunities for student-advisor interaction can also impact academic success. One study showed that students who met more often with advisors and received skill-specific assistance had higher GPAs than students who met less often (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013). Student satisfaction with advisement varies with the size of the institution, the demographics of the students, and the services provided, but one impactful variable in satisfaction with advisement is student involvement in competitive athletics.

Student Athletes

Mandated in 1991 by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for Division I athletes, athletic advisement is a high-visibility responsibility at colleges and universities that sponsor intercollegiate sports programs (Comeaux, 2015). Sports stars are usually recruited for their potential contributions on the field or court rather than their academic credentials (Winters & Gurney, 2012); therefore, academic support must address both sports eligibility and progress toward degree. Competitive sports complicate the college experience by introducing additional stressors as athletes strive to balance the demands of academics, competition, and psychological adjustment (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Cohn, 2004; Ridpath, 2006).

Academics. Earning a degree results from fulfilling uniform requirements, but students earning the degree are anything but identical. All students are distinct individuals with unique backgrounds, strengths, needs, and skill sets; therefore, earning a degree is not as straightforward as enrolling in a sequence of courses. This is reflected in the number of students who drop out at various points along the way and do not finish college (National Center for Education Statistics,

2016). There are myriad variables affecting academic success for athletes, but studies specifically reveal the impact of time demands, academic requirements, and learning difficulties (Clark & Parette, 2002; Gayles, 2009). Adjusting to the time demands of college work can lead to anxiety and low confidence (Clark & Parette, 2002). The time necessary to maintain peak strength and conditioning, along with practice and game schedules, consume athletes' time and make it difficult to devote time to academics (Horton, 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Character development, relationship formation and career preparation can often be neglected due to time constraints (Carodine et al., 2001). Interestingly, Gayles (2009) reported that female athletes were more successful at balancing the many demands on their time than their male counterpart athletes. Academic requirements drive the college experience and the same range of academic strengths and challenges affect athletes as other students (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). Like all students, athletes who engage in effective learning and study practices are more successful than those who do not (Horton, 2009; Umbach et al., 2006). Success in coursework is essential in part because academic progress is monitored by the NCAA for compliance with eligibility rules. In response to concerns, the NCAA implemented policies in 2004 to promote increased academic success. One policy established Academic Progress Rate (APR), an institutional-level accountability system in which student athletes receive points for being in school and remaining eligible. Total points are used team-by-team to calculate APR, and minimum four-year average APR scores are required for teams to participate in NCAA postseason play (NCAA, 2016a). A second policy established Progress Toward Degree (PTD), which monitors individual eligibility by requiring minimum semester-to-semester credits earned toward to an eventual degree. The policy requires that 40% of the degree be completed prior to

the third year, 60% prior to the fourth year, and 80% prior to a fifth year (NCAA, 2016b), and is monitored by the NCAA.

There is concern that NCAA requirements contribute to academic clustering, or channeling students into certain majors that are friendly to athletic schedules or have easier academic requirements. Although clustering can result from course requirements that do not accommodate practice and game schedules, some writers believe that APR has intensified the trend. This seems to be especially true in the revenue-generating sports of football and men's basketball (Fountain & Finley, 2011; Schneider, Ross, & Morgan, 2010). Inasmuch as personal interest in an academic major influences motivation and expenditure of effort, minimizing athletes' choices may negatively affect academic success (St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004).

Competition. High-level competition requires years of preparation and demands significant investments in time and energy. College athletes expect, and are expected, to prepare and perform at the levels for which they were recruited. This can lead to imbalance between the time spent on sports and the time spent on academic pursuits (Ayers, Pazmino-Cervillos, & Dubose, 2012). Although the NCAA (2015a) limits the time spent on sport-related activities to 20 hours per week during the season and eight hours per week in the off season, Ayers et al. (2012) reported that student athletes at one Division I institution averaged over 30 hours per week spent on their sport; more time than spent on academics. It is notable that athletes reported frequently missing classes, but rarely missed practices or games.

Psychological factors. Intense training, determination to excel, and expectations to win understandably affect athletes' psychological and emotional wellbeing. Research into multiple aspects of psychological and emotional health report a wide range of impactful factors. Elison

and Partridge (2012) found that fear of failure and performance embarrassment can lead to coping strategies that impair self-concept and relationships with others. Yang et al. (2007) wrote that 21% of research participant student athletes reported symptoms of depression, and more so among freshmen and females. Injured athletes can and do experience negative emotions ranging from fear to anger, anxiety and depression (Nippert & Smith, 2008; Yang, Peek-Asa, Lowe, Heiden, & Foster, 2010). A study of Division II male and female athletes found that half reported chronic injury and the effects of physical and mental exhaustion during their competitive seasons (Vetter & Symonds, 2010).

Negative stereotypes add to student athletes' stress (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004). The "dumb-jock" stereotype, in particular, can narrow athletes' self-concept, drive them to self-stereotype, and eventually lead to restricted educational opportunities (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012). Black student athletes can face racial hostilities, and report detecting low academic expectations from others (Comeaux, 2015). Negative faculty attitudes toward student-athletes can hinder the quality of academic interactions (Bimper et al., 2012; Comeaux, 2015). Conversely, positive student-faculty interaction is associated with increased learning, student development, and academic satisfaction (Comeaux, 2015).

The demands of academic responsibilities, competition, and various psychological factors impact all college student athletes and influence chances for success. One group that is particularly at risk are special admit athletes: those admitted for their athletic ability, but who lack the academic skills to succeed on their own.

Special Admit Athletes

Educational outcomes are especially concerning for special admit athletes, defined as students whose academic merit does not qualify them for admission under normal standards.

(White & Sedlacek, 1986; Winters & Gurney, 2012). Special admit athletes generally have below-average entrance exam scores and high school GPAs compared to other students (Ridpath, Kiger, Mak, Eagle, & Letter, 2007; Ting, 1997). Special admit students commonly struggle with basic academic skills, significant differences in learning conditions from secondary school, inadequate study skills, decreased self-confidence, unclear expectations, and deficient organizational skills (Eikeland & Manger, 1992; Winters & Gurney, 2012). Inadequate academic preparation increases the risk of poor performance in classes and can lead to withdrawal or dismissal from school (Addus et al., 2007). Moreover, students who experience academic problems may not seek assistance for a variety of reasons, including desires to be self-sufficient, desires to avoid negative stigma, unawareness of available services, or disagreeable previous advisory experiences (Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010). Findings about at-risk student satisfaction and success vary depending on the school and services provided. Some who sought assistance rated many of the services ineffective (Addus et al., 2007), while others who accessed support services regularly graduated at higher rates than students who did not (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The range and efficacy of services are key variables in advisement and support for special admit athletes.

Athlete Academic Support Services

Athlete academic support is a general term for all services designed to assist student athletes navigate the college experience. Services range from prescriptive advice about classes and majors to developmental programs for improving study methods, time management, self-advocacy, and emotional wellbeing (Pizzolato, 2008; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008; White, 2015). Academic support can play an important role in guiding students to learn and use effective practices. The more engaged students are in their educational experiences, the more

likely they are to be successful (Strayhorn, 2015); therefore, access to a helpful range of support programs is a key ingredient in successful college endeavors.

Successful academic support is a collaborative enterprise requiring investment by students, advisement and support professionals, coaches, and athletic directors (Gaston-Gayles, 2003; Strayhorn, 2015). Cohn (2004), reported that universities with the highest academically performing athletes had several collaborative factors in common. When academics were established as priority by key leaders such as coaches, athletic directors, and academic advisors; when positive and negative consequences for compliance were established; and when student athletes participated in existing support services, they tended to have higher graduation rates. Young-Jones et al. (2013) found that just meeting with an advisor once each semester significantly predicted student engagement in effective learning and study practice. However, the contemporary trend is away from advisement as telling and toward advisement as teaching: teaching learning and organizational strategies, teaching self-advocacy skills, teaching goal setting and attainment, and teaching personal responsibility (Pizzolato, 2008; Strayhorn, 2015; Walters, 2016). This trend toward proactive support is illustrated by the services provided by one Division I university.

Support Services at the Study University

Advisement and support services for athletes at one large private university combine traditional entry-level support for academically successful students with more intensive support for those at risk. The study university, an NCAA Division I institution in the western U.S., provides a range of advisement and support programs. The university has 19 teams competing in 12 sports, including 9 men's teams and 10 women's teams. The university's Student Athlete Life and Learning Center (SALLC) academic support staff consists of 10 people, 3 of whom

work part time. Services available for student athletes include advisors, learning specialists, tutors, a computer lab, student mentors, welfare professionals, and counseling and psychological services provided by a full-time university counselor who reserves 20 percent of his time exclusively for student athletes.

The SALLC director sits on the University Steering Committee and advises for or against the admission of special admit athletes depending upon their academic credentials. He also collaborates with coaches who request special admissions so they are aware of team obligations once the athletes are approved. The director supervises several advisors who make sure student athletes are enrolled in classes and verify that they attain the NCAA requirement for hours of enrollment. Advisors create clear and precise graduation plans for each individual. Priority registration is key for student athletes as they schedule around their sport, so advisors must find classes and times that fit. During the course of each semester advisors monitor holds on student athlete accounts resulting from parking tickets or unpaid late fees levied by the university. If a student athlete has a hold on account, then he or she can be withdrawn immediately from classes and is not allowed to register until the hold is cleared.

Learning specialists interact regularly with student athletes as they monitor grades and progress each semester. Learning specialists send in-depth weekly progress reports to coaches for all freshman and for athletes whose GPA is 2.5 or lower, and act as liaisons with the University Accessibility Center (UAC) for athletes who require disability services. Learning specialists hire, train, and supervise student tutors who provide content-specific assistance for classes in which athletes need extra help. A drop-in writing tutor is also available Monday through Thursday evenings. The program maintains a study room and lab with 12 computers, printers, and an office for a part-time learning specialist.

Mentors are university students assigned to freshmen to help the young student athletes learn organization and time management. Mentors use a scripted interview format to guide initial meetings with athletes as they get a feel for individual strengths and needs. In addition, mentors can be assigned to upper-class student athletes by request. Mentors submit meeting notes in weekly reports to coaches.

The student welfare specialist position was created to prepare student athletes to succeed in their chosen careers. The focus of student athlete welfare is post-graduation transition to the working world, accomplished through leadership opportunities in the SALLC, through community service, through life skills instruction, and through career preparation. The SALLC functions as the representative voice for student athletes. Community service has a very high demand and involves most student athletes. Life skills instruction includes topics such as writing resumes, participating in mock interviews, and learning to collaborate with coworkers. The university also sponsors semiannual career fairs exclusively for student athletes to network with potential employers.

Disability Services

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act require colleges and universities to provide equal access and reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973; Marshak et al., 2010). For those with disabilities or other difficulties, disability centers provide testing and support specific to student needs (Couzens et al., 2015). Services at the university are provided by the UAC. The UAC serves students with real or suspected disabilities, including, but not limited to, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, orthopedic impairments, and emotional disorders. The UAC provides

assessment and diagnosis, including approximately 250-300 ADHD screenings per year, and recommends accommodations for students (UAC psychologist, personal communication, October 18, 2016). The Center also conducts re-evaluations to update previous diagnoses. Staff estimate that 15-20% of students submit documentation of existing disabilities for their initial intake appointment (A. Allred, personal communication, October 18, 2016). The UAC employs eight full-time employees and one three-quarter time employee to work closely with at-risk students, including one employee stationed in career services. Service providers include one clinical psychologist and two counseling psychologists, one marriage and family therapist, and an additional psychologist. The degrees held in the UAC enable the professionals to diagnose and serve students with a wide range of conditions.

Athletes can be referred to the UAC by learning specialists or coaches, or can seek services of their own accord. During the summer of 2016, the UAC screened 37 new university athletes, six of whom were recommended to receive full assessments and six recommended for counseling services.

It is evident that the NCAA, colleges and universities, and researchers expend much thought and effort to identify and address the needs of student athletes. Support services are expanding and graduation rates are increasing, yet there is more to be done, particularly for special admit athletes. Further research is needed to study ways to identify and address the individual needs of these students, and to improve their opportunities for success.

Statement of Problem

The problem is that SALLC lacks a clear understanding of how special admit football athletes compare to general admit football athletes in academic progress and in perceptions of the efficacy of SALLC services. Athletes are susceptible to circumstances that can derail college or

university graduation. The complex mix of time required for athletic preparation and participation, the demands of class attendance and assignment completion, and the scope of academic and athletic emotional and psychological factors can prove difficult to surmount. Although showing improvement, participants in football are particularly at risk, consistently demonstrating the lowest APR scores among NCAA student athletes (Hosick, 2016). Concerns are especially acute for special admit athletes who lack the academic strengths and self-management skills so integral to success for all students. This is the case at the study university, where improving services should begin with an accurate description of special-admit athletes' academic standing, progress, and specific needs.

Purpose and Study Questions

The purpose of this study was to describe the academic progress of special-admit football players, to compare their progress to other football players, and to determine their perceptions of the efficacy of advisement and support services. The study investigated three questions:

1. What is the difference between special-admit football athletes and general admit football athletes in terms of number of credits enrolled, number of credits attained, progress toward degree and GPA for 2016-17?
2. What is the difference between special-admit football athletes and general admit football athletes in terms of progress toward degree and time spent with tutors for 2016-2017?
3. What are special-admit football athletes' perceptions of the effects of mentoring and tutoring on personal academic success for 2016-2017?

Method

Design

After IRB approval was obtained, the researcher used mixed methods to answer the study questions. Using a causal-comparative design the researcher sought to “compare two groups of participants that differed on a critical variable but were otherwise comparable” (Martella, Nelson, Morgan, & Marchand-Martella, 2013, p. 177). These data were used to answer the first two study questions. Employing inductive naturalistic inquiry as described by Guba and Lincoln (1985), the researcher used qualitative interviews combined with thematic analysis to answer the third study question. This approach was inductive in that the researcher did not begin with preconceived themes, but instead let them emerge through meaning unit coding and thematic development (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Setting

The setting for the quantitative data collection was the SALLC where existing data are kept and protected by the advisors. The setting for the qualitative interviews was a private interview room in the SALLC where study participants could answer questions confidentially.

Participants

Participants for the first two study questions were all football players enrolled for the 2016-2017 school year. Participants for the third question were all special admit athletes who consented to take part in individual interviews. Football players were chosen because football has the most special admit athletes on one team and is the sport with the lowest APR across the NCAA; therefore, this population is statistically most at risk for academic difficulties. A SALLC learning specialist sent a recruiting email to all special admit players and followed up with a

reminder message. The researcher then interviewed those who agreed to participate until data saturation was achieved.

Data Saturation

Using the Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) definition of data saturation, the researcher conducted interviews until no new information seemed to emerge from participants' responses. The researcher made this decision based on a general sense of the themes expressed rather than from post-interview analysis. The researcher deemed data to be redundant after interviewing 10 participants and therefore ceased interviewing.

Procedures

Quantitative data were provided by the SALLC and analyzed by the researcher and a faculty advisor. Qualitative data were collected via individual interviews with special admit athletes, as described below.

Independent and Dependent Variables

Independent variables for the first question were admission status (general or special admit), class, and credits enrolled. The independent variable for the second question was time spent with tutors. Dependent variables for the first question were credits attained, progress toward degree, and cumulative GPA for the year. The dependent variable for the second question was progress toward degree.

Data Collection

Data collection proceeded after receiving approval from the human subject review board. Quantitative data were provided by SALLC using confidential codes in place of student names. Advisement staff entered the data into an Excel spreadsheet according to participant, class,

semester, credits enrolled, credits attained, progress toward degree, GPA, and time spent with tutors.

The lead researcher conducted the interviews for the third question. The researcher organized the interviews by creating a recruitment statement which was sent to prospective participants by the advisors. Those who agreed to participate were invited to meet individually with the interviewer in the interview room. The interviewer provided each participant with a consent document and reviewed it to explain the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, participant confidentiality, risks and benefits, and \$25 gift card as compensation for completing the interview. Each participant was invited to sign two copies of the consent form, retaining one and giving one to the interviewer.

The interviewer then activated the audio recording device and asked the first question on the interview guide. The interviewer followed up participant responses with probing questions to clarify and expand the information, and then proceeded with the next question until the conclusion of the interview. When finished, the interviewer provided the gift card and thanked and excused the participant.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using two different methods. Data from the first study question were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with number of credits enrolled, number of credits attained, progress toward degree, and GPA as the dependent variables. The athletes' admission status (special admit or general admit) represented the independent variables. A MANOVA indicates statistically significant differences between groups, but does not identify the variables on which the groups differ. If the MANOVA indicated

statistical significance, then post hoc ANOVA was used to identify specific variables with significant difference. (Martella et al., 2013).

The second question was analyzed using multiple regression to determine whether time spent with tutors predicted progress toward degree for special and general admit athletes. Multiple regression is used to determine relationships between independent and dependent variables (Martella et al., 2013). The independent variable was time spent with tutors and the dependent variable was progress toward degree.

The interviewer transcribed the audio-recorded interviews. Transcriptions were printed and analyzed using a six-step approach to thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The purpose of thematic analysis is to capture important meanings in the interview data. This involves becoming familiar with the data, assigning initial codes, identifying themes within the codes, revising themes as needed, labeling each theme, writing the final report. The lead researcher and faculty advisor independently read and coded the transcribed interviews, then arranged the codes by initial themes. The coders then met together and discussed each code and theme, coming to agreement on the themes and theme labels. The lead researcher submitted the themes to a third-party referee to check accuracy and enhance the trustworthiness of the process. The referee assisted in reframing the themes as propositions (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) to use in completing the final report.

Quantitative Results

Data analysis yielded answers to the quantitative study questions. Question 1 asked the difference between special-admit football athletes and general admit football athletes in terms of number of credits enrolled, number of credits earned, progress toward degree and GPA for 2016-17. The ANOVA data for the number of credits enrolled, number of credits earned, and progress

toward degree was not significant. However, data indicated a significant difference in GPA between general and special admit athletes ($p=0.003$), general admits having significantly higher GPA's than special admit athletes.

Question 2 asked the difference between special admit football athletes and general admit football athletes in terms of progress toward degree and time spent with tutors for 2016-17. An independent sample t-test indicated that there was no significant difference between special admit and general admit football athletes in terms of time spent with tutors during the academic school year ($p=0.118$). The ANOVA indicated no significant difference ($p= 0.870$) between special admit and general admit football athletes in terms of Fall and Winter progress toward degree (F/W PTD).

A single regression test was used to determine if a correlation exists between progress toward degree and tutor time. The correlation proved significant ($p=0.001$) showing that time spent with tutors correlated positively with progress toward degree. Figure 1 shows the positive correlation between progress toward degree and tutor time. These data represent only the SALLC tutors and do not indicate whether athletes sought help from professors, teaching assistants, or labs.

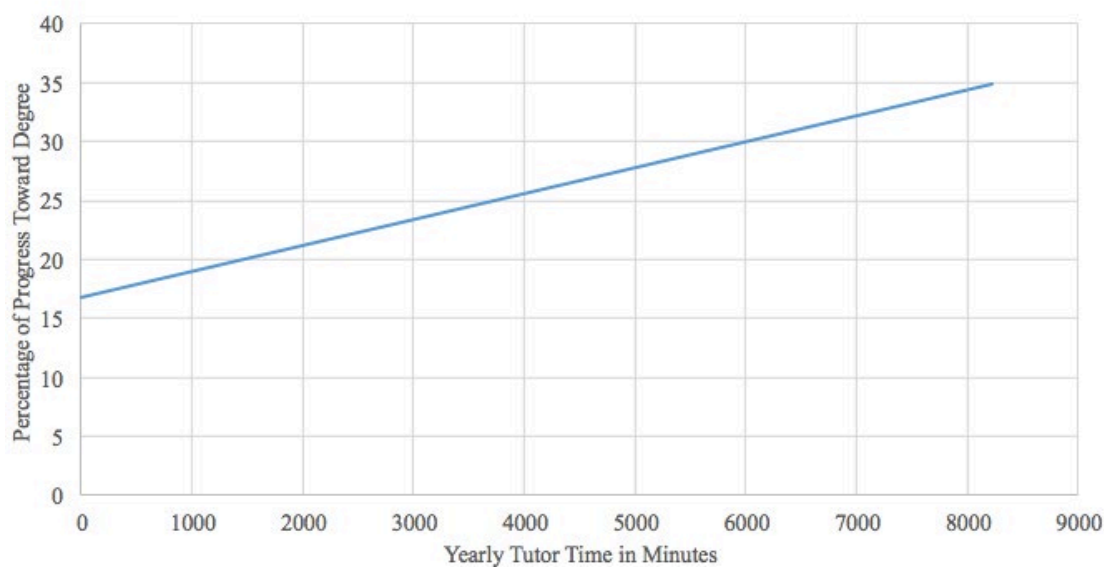


Figure 1. Percentage of progress toward degree and minutes spent with tutors during the 2016-2017 school year.

The SALLC closely monitors the time each athlete spends with tutors. Of the 142 participant athletes, 79 (56%) accessed a SALLC tutor during the year. Data show no significant difference between the groups in terms of the time spent with tutors, although proportionately more special admit athletes (63%) than general admit athletes (43%) accessed tutors at least one time. The more time that the athletes spent with tutors, the more progress toward graduation they accomplished, as indicated by the number credits earned each semester. These findings support previous research reporting positive correlations between tutoring and academic performance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Munley, Garvey, & McConnell, 2010).

Qualitative Findings

Interview data indicated that participants most valued tutoring and their relationships with learning specialists. They also provided suggestions for improvement for the work of tutors and learning specialists.

Tutoring

Participants reported that tutoring was the SALLC resource used most, suggesting that those who access tutors understand the positive correlation between tutor time and progress toward degree. When asked which service he used most often, one third-year athlete stated, “Tutoring, and speaking not only on my behalf but probably every student athlete here.”

Participants reported that tutors helped them review content and concepts, work on assignments, and prepare for exams. They found that working on homework problems with tutors proved to be very helpful. When athletes got stuck tutors would help them with the next step. One said, “We’ll just go over the questions I have on my homework or the notes that I learned that day maybe. We’ll go over, like, a practice test if there’s a test in a few weeks.” Another noted tutor assistance varied with the subject area, stating, “With my math tutor, it’s more like learning it again. With my Econ tutor it’s just practice.”

Individual athletes and tutors arranged session days and times between themselves. Tutor sessions usually lasted about an hour with some reported sessions of one and one-half to two hours. Scheduling conflicts were frustrating for some. One participant noted, “We have practice in the morning and sometimes the tutors have classes in the afternoon. Sometimes my tutor session overlaps with my classes.” While recognizing that peer tutors experience time constraints typical of all students, one participant said, “It would be nice if they would like make sure that if you’re gonna be a tutor, that you have time to be a tutor.” Another suggested paying tutors more, then requiring them to be available at times to match athletes’ schedules. One participant was frustrated by different understandings of the tutor role, saying

I stopped using tutors this semester 'cause sometimes it's hard, 'cause when tutors come, they think that guiding you in a certain direction is against the honor code, maybe they think its cheating a little bit, but [the athletes] don't view it that way.

Participants offered helpful suggestions for tutors, including building relationships and being knowledgeable in the content. These findings are consistent with research by McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis (2004), who suggest that warm relationships can be extremely important.

One athlete said

I would recommend that you try to get to know the person you're working with. Um, that really helps. We established a relationship. It's not just all school. We talk for like ten, fifteen minutes just to talk; what's going on in life, and video games, and football.

Yet another commented on a tutor's capacity to help, saying, "I'm already lost, so if they're not confident in it then it just kind of screws me up."

Learning Specialists

Second to tutors, participants mentioned the importance of learning specialists to their academic success. Learning specialists are SALLC employees that interact regularly with student athletes as they monitor grades and progress each semester. They also hire, train, and supervise mentors and tutors. Interview participants were not clear on the differences between learning specialists, mentors, and tutors; often using the terms interchangeably. When questioned further, they would typically describe the role of a learning specialist even if they had used another term. Overall, athletes reported that learning specialists helped them organize their study materials, provided a weekly schedule of classes and exams, and held them accountable for academic work. Winters and Gurney (2012) reported similar findings, indicating that the lack of basic skills create academic difficulty for many students. One participant reported that learning

specialists help athletes avoid losing their textbooks and other school necessities. He said, “[They] make sure that we are organized so, like, when we get our books and stuff we just leave it in our mentor’s office so we know where our stuff is.” Another athlete reported, “[They can help you] find what you’re looking for or organize papers. Anything that involves homework or studying for tests really can be done up here.”

Most of the participants reported that the weekly schedule provided by the learning specialists was extremely helpful. One said, “Now my advisor just plans out my schedule for the week and, like, tells me what to do each day, when I have tests and all that.” Another athlete found the organization of weekly assignments to be very useful. “[The learning specialist] prints out a weekly form for us with our assignments, when we should start studying for the test.”

Learning specialists are the primary source of accountability for student athletes. One reported, “If things start slipping and start going downhill, then, like, she’ll pull me in and I have to stay in here for a certain amount of hours and make sure I get my work done.” Younger athletes struggled with learning to be accountable, as this freshman participant: “Sometimes accountability is tough, especially when you don’t feel like doing something.” Another reflected on his first couple of years, stating, “Obviously, my grades showed that I was doing better in my classes, but [being accountable] was just annoying.” Team travel schedules impacted attitudes toward accountability. One player stated,

You have to be accountable to someone who says, “Hey, why didn’t you do this, this and this when you were gone in a hotel?” It was kind of tough to be called out for things that you should have done but, realistically, it’s not gonna get done.

Learning specialists are also adept at teaching valuable study skills. “You can study with a learning specialist. They can teach you tricks on how to read a book; I mean, how to read a

textbook [and] find what you're looking for, or organize papers." Similar findings were reported by both Eikeland and Manger (1992) and Winters and Gurney (2012) showing that a student's organization skills, along with several other basic academic skills, are critical for success at the University level.

Not surprisingly, athletes reported that forming a relationship with their learning specialist was very important (Figure 2). "I'll just go to her and she just helps me with my papers. She just helps me with whatever I need. And, like, I talk with her, about even my car." Another stated, "He knows my wife and my family so he puts things that really matter to me out there. So he really helps motivate me to work hard." For some athletes, the role of a learning specialist evolved over time. One said, "Freshman year...I would read [a textbook] and she'd like stop me and say did you get that? Like, are you seeing what its saying about this or that?" The same athlete reported a change in the role as he progressed in his program, "I don't use it as much as I did.... now it's more for the scheduling. Turn this in, work on this, this is due on this day."

Participants noting the importance of relationships with tutors and learning specialists is congruent with a body of literature (Lynch, 2004; Fricker, 2015; Mottarella, Ritzsche, & Cerabino, 2004; Vianden, 2016). In a study of three Midwestern universities, Vianden (2016) found that students valued advisors who listened, provided reliable advice, and instilled a sense of belonging. Those advisors that took the time to get to know their students were more appreciated than other advisors. Furthermore, Vianden reported that unresponsive advisors tended to discourage their students from seeking help in the future. Fricker's (2015) review of the literature unearthed similar findings of academic success in the presence of a good relationship between student and advisor. In a study analyzing 9,200 student evaluation

questionnaires, McKinsey (2015) reported that the essence of a good educational experience is founded on personal, supportive interactions with faculty members and mentors.

Student athletes reported using tutors most often to review concepts from class, complete homework assignments and prepare for tests. They further reported generally using learning specialists to stay organized, monitor their weekly schedules and provide a certain level of academic accountability. While these services all contribute to academic well-being, students reported that having quality relationships with their service providers was crucial to their success (see Figure 2).

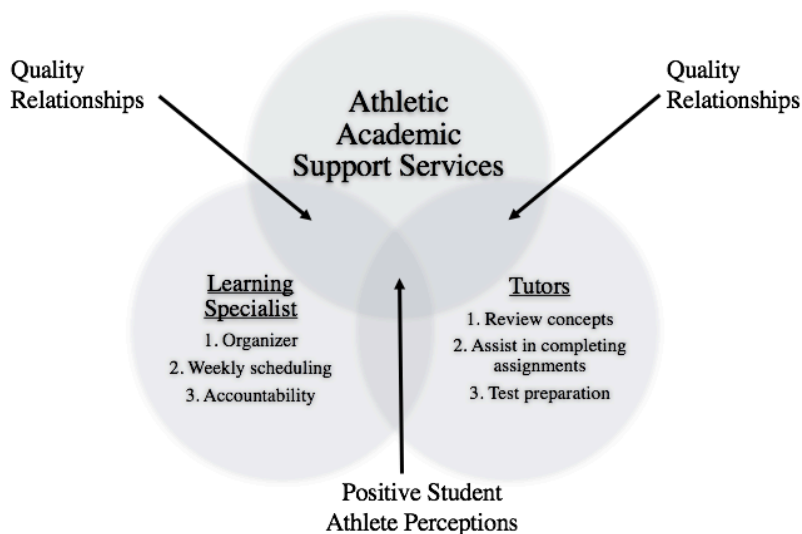


Figure 2. Relationships and positive student perceptions of learning specialists and tutors.

Participant Recommendations

Participants offered recommendations for improving the work of learning specialists. Marshak et al. (2010) reported that some students have difficulty seeking help when they need it. One athlete in the current study suggested that learning specialists should more actively seek out struggling athletes who may be flying under the radar.

They come ask me if I need help, but they don't ask some of those other kids that they think are doing okay... And those kids are actually, like, struggling... but they don't like to go ask for themselves, and I don't like to ask for myself.

Another participant suggested that there may not be enough learning specialists to support the needs of the athletes, saying

Maybe if they hired more? Cause I feel like there's only, like, a few of 'em, and there's like, a lot of guys are with, like, one mentor, so it's kind of harder to be more, like, direct and specific with them when, like, ten to fifteen other guys are working with just my mentor.

Another insightful suggestion was to direct students to certain resources: "Maybe if learning specialists would help kids kind of use TAs more, I think that would help them. What tutor's better than the TA of your own class?"

While the majority of athletes reported having a positive experience with the SALLC and its resources, one student expressed his frustration with the system by saying,

I'm forced to come up. Like every school day. But sometimes I don't. If you're, like, kind of behind grades and you have, like, low grades they make sure you're up here. If you don't come then they will probably notify your coach or something.

This dissatisfaction was echoed by another student when describing his freshman experience.

I had to be here after practice at 6:00 and we weren't allowed to leave until like 10:00. So that's a long time.... We would have nothing to do but you literally have to pretend that you're doing homework for four hours.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the academic progress of special-admit football players compared to general admit players. It adds to the literature by detailing the achievement, concerns and most-valued supports for academically at-risk special admit athletes at a Division I university. Data indicate that while general admit athletes achieved higher GPAs, special admit athletes experienced similar rates of progress toward degree, indicating that both groups pass the same number of classes. Data show no difference between the two groups in credits enrolled, likely because all players must enroll in a minimum number of credits to be eligible for participation. There was no significant difference between the two groups in credits earned. While general admits had significantly higher GPAs than special admits, they did not have significantly higher rates of progress toward degree. Higher GPAs can likely be attributed to general admit athletes having the skill set necessary to learn and study on their own while special admit athletes need assistance developing those necessary skills. These findings support the research by Eikeland and Manger (1992) and Winters and Gurney (2012) that included reports of students not being well prepared for the rigors of university study. Similarities in credits earned and progress toward degree indicate that although general admit athletes earned better grades, special admits passed a proportionate number of classes. The lack of differences between the groups in credits earned and progress toward degree likely resulted from SALLC's efforts to track student progress, to provide one-on-one and small group academic assistance, and to monitor credit requirements to maintain eligibility and progress toward degree, although the study did not produce specific correlations based on evidence.

Research indicates varying levels of satisfaction with academic assistance based on the types of services and whether they are centralized to the institution or localized to programs

(Aldus et al., 2007; Kot, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Young-Jones et al., 2013). The current study indicates that participants value the SALLC program that caters exclusively to athletes and provides access to tutors and learning specialists. Tutor usage correlated positively with progress toward degree and special admits reported using tutoring services most often, followed by learning specialists. This frequency of access is likely attributable to students' ongoing need for tutoring in one or more classes with less contact required for learning specialist assistance.

The athletes revealed that having supportive personal relationships with tutors and learning specialists was notably important to academic success. Motterella et al. (2004) reported students valued supportive relationships with advisors who showed interest in their well-being. This may be especially important for freshmen or transfer athletes as they enter new environments away from the comfortable emotional supports of family and friends. As noted, the pressures of training and competing while adjusting to an academic environment significantly different than high school can foster a range of doubts, fears, and uncertainties. Add to this the burden of academic difficulties and it is not surprising that special admit athletes especially notice and benefit from trusted professionals who guide and support them. These relationships are also a source of accountability as young student athletes learn and implement responsible behaviors leading to academic success.

Limitations

This study is limited by its restriction to one university. It is unknown whether the results are generalizable to similar institutions providing academic support to student athletes. Ten participants completed the interview portion of the study and although the interviewer had a general sense that the data became redundant, it is possible that interviewing more participants

would reveal additional themes not derived from the qualitative data. Although nearly one-third (10 of 36) of special admit football players were interviewed, others who chose not to participate might have offered different perspectives.

Implications for Further Research

Further research should look at programs at other universities to gain a broader understanding of academic support. The results of this study are unique to the study university's academic support center that includes access to peer tutors and learning specialists, both of which are separate from academic advisors. Research into the effectiveness of academic support programs with different structures and services would be an important contribution. It should also be noted that other universities likely have similar academic support positions under different titles. Further studies should investigate the impact of academic support on other sports with unique needs that vary by size of the team, gender, and the semester or semesters during which athletes compete.

Considering the resources invested in assisting relatively few students at a university with the aim of keeping them eligible and moving them toward successful completion, it would be worthwhile to study the return on investment of athlete-specific academic support within the broader scope of the student population. Universities must continually decide how to apportion available monies, and data concerning the impact of expenditures for athletic academic support should be considered within the context of the entire university.

Implications for Practice

This study reveals implications for practice that can benefit athlete academic advisement in other universities. Special admit athletes benefit from content tutoring and from learning specialists who help them learn to schedule their time, organize their school work and be

accountable for learning behaviors. While tutors and advisors provide important support services, the foundation of effective academic support comes from strong personal relationships with the students. Most learners enjoy and benefit from personal attention from tutors who can help them understand and master skills and content. Tutors are most helpful when they are knowledgeable in their subject matter and willing to reteach concepts. Tutors must be available at times that accommodate student athletes' schedules. Tutoring sessions are most helpful when they include review of concepts from class, assistance with homework, and preparation for upcoming tests. Tutors have the most positive academic impact when they create supportive relationships and know their students on a personal level.

Learning specialists that regularly monitor grades and student progress can be significantly impactful. Their position allows them to supervise tutors and ensure quality academic support for the athletes. The learning specialists' persistent efforts to teach organization and scheduling are also important for those students who have not yet developed self-regulatory skills. Learning to organize textbooks and other materials in ways that promote assignment completion and exam preparation are helpful. Interestingly, the lead learning specialist in this study mentioned the importance of helping athletes learn and practice organizational skills rather than continuing to do these tasks for them. It is important for learning specialists or advisors to imbue qualities of accountability and learner independence. Athletes who initially resisted being accountable but developed that attribute over the course of their education responded better to guidance and the need for personal responsibility. As with tutors, the learning specialists' relationships with the athletes is important. Taking time to listen and learn about each individual can pay great dividends over the course of relationships.

Conclusion

A percentage of college student athletes are at-risk for academic failure due to their academic under preparation. This study investigated athletes in football, the sport involving the statistically highest number of special admit athletes in Division I sports. These students benefit most from content tutoring and mentoring in strategies for success. Inasmuch as the two academic goals for these students are eligibility to play and attainment of degrees, the results of this study can help athlete support programs to focus efforts and resources on the most effective services for accomplishing these ends. In this way, support programs that employ evidence-based practices will best meet the needs of special admit student athletes.

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APPENDIX A

Extended Literature Review

Calls for accountability for higher education outcomes have generated an increase in the breadth and depth of academic support programs (Brown, 2012; McKeown-Moak, 2013; Zumeta, 2011). Whereas advisors historically assisted students to declare majors and enroll in appropriate courses, contemporary support includes remedial courses, tutoring and mentoring services, study skills workshops, and more “homey” campus study areas as strategies to retain and graduate more students (White, 2015). Academic support begins with advisement, a universal feature of postsecondary education tasked with helping students make informed educational decisions. Academic advisement is the on-campus service with the potential to reach every student with information about an institution’s mission, purpose, academic offerings, co-curricular activities, and career planning (White, 2015). Its essential function is to guide and assist students to choose appropriate majors and then provide support as students complete requirements for graduation (Pizzolato, 2008).

The nature and purpose of academic advisement has evolved with changes in higher education. Whereas the undergraduate degree originally provided young adults with a broad liberal arts education to prepare them for responsible and contributive citizenship, there are indications that universities now place less value on general education as they focus on preparation for the job market (Berrett, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2011). Some believe that this causes advisors to guide students towards lucrative careers that will ensure employment and make loan repayment possible (Selingo, 2015; White, 2013). The Association of American Colleges and Universities addresses this concern by calling for “integrative liberal education” to blend the purposes of general education and professional preparation (Robbins, 2014).

Regardless of the trends toward or away from traditional practice, advisement today transcends basic information on courses and majors to provide mentoring, personal development, and socioemotional support to students (Gravel, 2012; Lowenstein, 2007).

Advisement generally takes one of three forms: centralized at the university, housed in academic units, or assigned to faculty members (Pardee, 2004). Kot (2014) found that students who accessed centralized advising had higher GPAs and less attrition after the freshman year than students who did not use advisement services. Addus, Chen, and Khan (2007) found a strong preference for unit-level advisement. Academic unit-level advisement occurs when individual schools or colleges within a university provide localized advisement centers. Academic unit-level advisement potentially provides more personal attention than a campus-wide system, especially at larger universities. Student survey respondents in the Addus et al. study reported that centralized advisement was ineffective and that unit-level advisement was preferable. Other researchers found that students valued supportive relationships with professional advisors who show interest in their wellbeing more than they valued other variables (Mottarella, Ritzsche, & Cerabino, 2004), a situation potentially more feasible with unit-level advisement. Advisement that provides more opportunities for student-advisor interaction can also impact academic success. One study showed that students who met more often with advisors and received skill-specific assistance had higher GPAs than students who met less often (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013). Student satisfaction with advisement varies with the size of the institution, the demographics of the students, and the services provided, but one impactful variable in satisfaction with advisement is student involvement in competitive athletics.

Mandated in 1991 by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for Division I athletes, athletic advisement is a high-visibility responsibility at colleges and universities that sponsor intercollegiate sports programs (Comeaux, 2015). Sports stars are usually recruited for their potential contributions on the field or court rather than their academic credentials (Winters & Gurney, 2012); therefore, academic support must address both sports eligibility and progress toward degree. Competitive sports complicate the college experience by introducing additional stressors as athletes strive to balance the demands of academics, competition, and psychological adjustment (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Cohn, 2004; Ridpath, 2006).

Academics

Earning a degree results from fulfilling uniform requirements, but students earning the degree are anything but identical. All students are distinct individuals with unique backgrounds, strengths, needs, and skill sets; therefore, earning a degree is not as straightforward as enrolling in a sequence of courses. This is reflected in the number of students who drop out at various points along the way and do not finish college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). There are myriad variables affecting academic success for athletes, but studies specifically reveal the impact of time demands, academic requirements, and learning difficulties (Clark & Parette, 2002; Gayles, 2009). Adjusting to the time demands of college work can lead to anxiety and low confidence (Clark & Parette, 2002). Juggling the dual roles of athlete and student can produce excessive psychological and physical stress. The amount of time necessary to maintain peak strength and conditioning, along with practice and game schedules, consume athletes' time and make it difficult to devote time to academics. (Horton, 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Character development, relationship formation and career preparation can often be neglected due to time constraints (Carodine et al., 2001). Interestingly, Gayles (2009) reported that female

athletes were more successful at balancing the many demands on their time than their male counterpart athletes.

Academic requirements drive the college experience, and the same range of academic strengths and challenges affect athletes as other students (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). Like all students, athletes who engage in effective learning and study practices are more successful than those who do not (Horton, 2009; Umbach et al., 2006). Success in coursework is essential in part because academic progress is monitored by the NCAA for compliance with eligibility rules. In response to concerns, the NCAA implemented policies in 2004 to promote increased academic success. One policy established Academic Progress Rate (APR), an institutional-level accountability system in which student athletes receive points for being in school and remaining eligible. Total points are used team-by-team to calculate APR, and minimum four-year average APR scores are required for teams to participate in NCAA postseason play (NCAA, 2016a). A second policy established Progress Toward Degree (PTD), which monitors individual eligibility by requiring minimum semester-to-semester credits earned toward to an eventual degree. The policy requires that 40% of the degree be completed prior to the third year, 60% prior to the fourth year, and 80% prior to a fifth year (NCAA, 2016b), and is monitored by the NCAA.

There is concern that NCAA requirements contribute to academic clustering, or channeling students into certain majors that are friendly to athletic schedules or have easier academic requirements. Although clustering can result from course requirements that do not accommodate practice and game schedules, some writers believe that APR has intensified the trend. This seems to be especially true in the revenue-generating sports of football and men's basketball (Fountain & Finley, 2011; Schneider, Ross, & Morgan, 2010). Inasmuch as personal

interest in an academic major influences motivation and expenditure of effort, minimizing athletes' choices may negatively affect academic success (St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004).

Learning difficulties, including diagnosed or undiagnosed learning disabilities, add another layer of complexity (Clark, 2002). Learning disabilities contribute to low academic performance which, in turn, damages athletes' eligibility status and graduation perspectives (Clark & Parette, 2002). Many athletes choose not to disclose their disabilities; and although this is well within their rights, it can be problematic for gaining access to accommodations and special services (Ridpath, n.d.). Athletes with learning disabilities can be labeled as unmotivated or uncooperative by those around them (Clark & Parette, 2002). This stereotype creates a fear of the label "disability," explaining why many choose to avoid testing or to avoid disclosing their learning disabilities in the hopes of a fresh start at the university (May & Stone, 2010; Ridpath, n.d).

Competition

High-level competition requires years of preparation and demands significant investments in time and energy. College athletes expect and are expected to prepare and perform at the levels for which they were recruited. This can lead to imbalance between the time spent on sports and the time spent on academic pursuits (Ayers, Pazmino-Cervillos, & Dubose, 2012). Although the NCAA (2015a) limits the time spent on sport-related activities to 20 hours per week during the season and eight hours per week in the off season, Ayers et al. (2012) reported that student athletes at one Division I institution averaged over 30 hours per week spent on their sport; more time than spent on academics. It is notable that athletes reported frequently missing classes, but rarely missed practices or games.

Psychological Factors

Intense training, determination to excel, and expectations to win understandably affect athletes' psychological and emotional wellbeing. Research into multiple aspects of psychological and emotional health report a wide range of impactful factors. Elison and Partridge (2012) found that fear of failure and performance embarrassment can lead to coping strategies that impair self-concept and relationships with others. Yang et al. (2007) wrote that 21% of research participant student athletes reported symptoms of depression, and more so among freshmen and females. Injured athletes can and do experience negative emotions ranging from fear to anger, anxiety and depression (Nippert & Smith, 2008; Yang, Peek-Asa, Lowe, Heiden, & Foster, 2010). A study of Division II male and female athletes found that half reported chronic injury and the effects of physical and mental exhaustion during their competitive seasons (Vetter & Symonds, 2010).

Negative stereotypes add to student athletes' stress (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004). The "dumb-jock" stereotype, in particular, can narrow athletes' self-concept, drive them to self-stereotype, and eventually lead to restricted educational opportunities (Bimper et al., 2012). Black student athletes can face racial hostilities, and report detecting low academic expectations from others (Comeaux, 2011). Negative faculty attitudes toward student-athletes can hinder the quality of academic interactions (Bimper et al., 2012)

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APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

My name is Nicole and I will conduct our interview today. Let's begin by making sure you understand the consent form. (Hand one copy to participant.) I will read it aloud, and you can ask any questions you like. (Read document.) Do you have any questions?

Please print your name here (point) and sign here (point) and enter the date. This copy is for you to keep (give unsigned copy, keep signed copy).

During the interview I will read each question aloud and wait while you respond. I may ask other questions to clarify your responses. I will then move to the next question, and continue until we are finished. Do you have any questions?

Start recording device.

1. Please state your name.
2. What is your year in school?
 - Freshman, sophomore ...
3. What services are offered by the Student Athlete Academic Center?
 - What does a mentor do?
 - What does a tutor do?
 - What does a learning specialist do?
 - What does an advisor do?
4. Have you visited the Student Athlete Academic Center this year?

If "no" –

- What was your reason for not using the center?

If "yes" –

- About how often did you go to the center?
 - How many times per week did you go to the center?
5. What services did you access at the center?
- Did you meet with a mentor? How often?
 - Did you meet with a tutor? How often?
 - Did you meet with a learning specialist? How often?
6. How did the _____ help you? (Repeat for other service providers)
- What did the _____ do to help you with your ____?
7. How much time did the ___ spend with you each time? (Repeat for other service providers)
8. What did the _____ do that was most useful to you? (Repeat for other service providers)
- Why (or how) was that helpful?
9. What kind of help do you wish you would have received?
- How would that have been helpful?
10. What would you recommend to improve the work of mentors?
- Why (or how) would that be helpful?
11. What would you recommend to improve the work of tutors?
- Why (or how) would that be helpful?

APPENDIX C

Consent Form to be a Research Subject

Introduction

This research is being conducted by Nicole McCullough, graduate student, and Gordon Gibb, PhD at Brigham Young University to determine football athletes' perceptions of academic support services. You are invited to participate because you are a member of the football team.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study you will be asked to participate in an interview for approximately 30 minutes regarding your perceptions of athlete academic support services. The interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements. It will take place in a private room in the Student Athlete Academic center. The researchers may contact you later to clarify your answers for approximately 15 minutes. The total time commitment will be about 45 minutes.

Risks/Discomforts

You may feel uncomfortable responding to interview questions. We will minimize these risks by allowing you to stop the interview at any time without affecting your standing with the team or the University. We will protect your confidentiality in all aspects of the study.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in the study. It is hoped, however, that through your participation the researchers will learn ways to improve academic support services for athletes.

Confidentiality

We will use anonymous codes for your name. Your name will not appear in any published report. All paper and password-protected digital data will be stored in a locked faculty office at the university. Only the researchers and their assistants will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study all identifying information will be removed and the data will be stored in the researchers' locked offices.

Compensation

Participants will receive a \$25.00 gift card for participating in the interview. Compensation will not be prorated.

Participation

Participation in the study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your standing with the team or the University.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Gordon Gibb at 801-422-4915 gordon_gibb@byu.edu; 340 MCKB Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602 for further information.

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the IRB Administrator at (801) 422-1461, A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; irb@byu.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name (printed): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____